

Writing Canadian Identity: A Review of Recent Studies in the Humanities and Social Sciences

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Richard J.F. Day. *Multiculturalism and the History of Canadian Diversity*.

Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000. 288 p. ISBN 0-8020-8075-8. US\$ 19.95 (pbk)

Sherrill E. Grace. *Canada and the Idea of North*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill Queen's University Press, 2002. 368 p. ISBN 0-7735-2247-6. US\$ 49.95 (hdb)

Eva Mackey. *The House of Difference: Cultural Politics and National Identity in Canada*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002. 216 p. ISBN 0-8020-8481-8. US\$ 21.95 (pbk)

Herb Wyile. *Speculative Fictions: Contemporary Canadian Novelists and the Writing of History*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill Queen's University Press, 2002. 360 p. US\$ 75.00 (hdb)

Canada is a country said to live in the shadow of a perpetual identity crisis, and for that it suffers no end of definitional attempts. The attempts have more often than not arisen out of national crises: "rebellions" of subject peoples in the West; controversies over religion and schools, over wartime conscription, official languages, Quebec separation, Native land claims and governance; constitutional debates and anxieties around immigration. Each has prompted fundamental questions about the Canadian identity: English or French? Colony or Nation? Protestant or Catholic? European or North American? Easterner or Westerner? White or 'Other'? Added to such social conflicts is the problem of the sheer size and diversity of the country itself, with its varied cultural and geographical regions, each with different settlement and linguistic patterns. And let's not forget the world's longest undefended border and the world's most economically and culturally invasive nation to the south. How can an identity be forged out of such diversity and so much geographical bad luck? The answer, in short: Talk about the weather. Snow and will do the trick, but if you travel with a more sophisticated crowd, you might try a fancy academic buzz word like nordicity. However you slice it, there's no denying Canada is a northern nation, a cold country, a land of snow, the fabled Great White North, where the beer cools on the balcony and the donut

shop is a winter refuge open 24-7. Now, before you dismiss the extent to which we can sustain a national conversation around winter weather, or the vagaries of something called nordicity, have a look at a book that explores Canada's northern character in detail.

Sherril E. Grace's encyclopedic *Canada and the Idea of North* (2001) takes the title of legendary composer Glen Gould's 1967 documentary in its exploration of Canada's image as a northern nation. As the title suggests, Grace is not concerned with the actual North but with the representation of the North and of Canada as a northern nation, more specifically representations "within and across a range of signifying practices" (21). Those practices include history, geography, politics, pop culture, and the arts. That said, Grace's focus on representation is not a nihilistic post-modernist critique that exposes our Northernness as downright lies formulated by the metropolitan Southerners who dominate its representation. Rather, she sees the necessity of bringing new voices into what she calls "the discursive formation of North" (23). The reality of that inclusionary gesture is taken up in the book's final part, "The North Writes Back." Among the many signs of a post-colonial rebirth of Native cultures is the historic creation of the new Canadian territory of Nunavut in 1999, which required the settlement of land claims, the redrawing of borders, and the erasure of the colonizers' names on maps. Others include the the Inuit Broadcasting Corporation, Television Northern Canada and Igloodik Isuma Productions, serving or owned by Inuit people.

Part One, "Writing the North," presents in outline Grace's methodology, which proceeds on three levels, following approaches inspired by Michel Foucault's archaeology, Pierre Bourdieu's concept of habitus, and Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of dialogism. The rest of Part One explores the representations of North among geographers, historians, politicians and political scientists, showing the importance of the idea of North to the creation of a Canadian identity. Interestingly, the North as an integrating symbol of Canada is itself problematic. Indexes of latitude or weather fail to define where north truly is. Moreover, the discourses that create it are perpetually shifting: Grace suggests that there are many norths, not just one, conjured out of different boundaries, experiences, and through various meanings and measures. Part Two, "Articulating North," explores the role of maps, music, and the stage and screen in the discursive formation of the North and of Canada-as-North. In the first meditation, Grace focusses on what she calls in-between maps; that is, cartographic renderings that reimagine "the reality we expect to find referenced by maps" (85). These maps also testify to the elusiveness of defining the North as an experience of climate or geographical location. In her survey of music, somewhat weakly assimilated to her semiotic approach, as she openly admits, Grace looks at music inspired by painting, compositions of voice and text, and non-programmatic music. On stage and screen, too, the idea of North, of representing Canada-as-North has played a central role. Both plays and films attest to the

North as "symbolic place of freedom, of letting go, of spiritual sustenance, and, yes, of death" (156) in the Canadian imagination. Part Three, "Narrating a Northern Narration" turns to fiction, which Grace considers the most powerful of forms for creating the north through words. Sketching a picture of what she calls "old" northern stories and including non-fiction accounts of the north from the late 1800s, she assesses the work of six contemporary writers and their "new" imaginings of the North. While the old stories construct the North as "a space for virile, white male adventure in a harsh but magnificent, unspoiled landscape waiting to be discovered, charted, painted, and photographed *as if for the first time*" (174; author's emphasis), the six writers of the "new" North — Rudy Wiebe, Robert Kroetsch, Aritha Van Herk, Elizabeth Hay, Mordecai Richler and Gabrielle Roy — lay "imaginative claim" to the North "without pretending to fill or define it." Likewise, they acknowledge that "there are stories out and up there that cannot be told by the southern-based Euro-Canadian writer, no matter how travelled or informed he or she may be" (225).

If the experience of a chilling north wind, the sudden arrival of a blinding snowstorm (along with the task of shoveling out from under it), or contemplation of the mysterious northern frontier is not enough to throw Canadians into fits of nationalistic fervour, there is always that essentially Canadian icon, the Royal Canadian Mounted Policeman. More than just an emblem of Dudley Do-Right politeness, this symbol of Canadian identity signifies the myth of Canadian fairness and tolerance. An influential historical study of the United Empire Loyalists who fled the America Revolution took as its title "The Good Americans"; the tradition nourishing of Canadian self-righteous on deriding evil America has never looked back. The myth of Canadian tolerance and fairness is evoked in the postcard of a smiling Mountie greeting Chief Sitting Eagle that adorns the cover of Eva Mackey's ethnographic work, *The House of Difference: Cultural Politics and National Identity in Canada*. For Mackey, the Royal Canadian Mounted Policeman represents the benevolence of the Canadian state, buttressed by the tradition of British justice, the Mountie meeting and greeting a minority on equal footing. Mackey's is also a book about Canadian identity, but she sees a fundamental difference in the Canadian nation-building exercise. Citing the frequent critical assumption that nations and the modern forces they harness are destructive of cultural differences, Mackey asks, "How can we critically understand a cultural politics seemingly based on inclusion and tolerance rather than erasure and homogeneity?" (3; author's emphasis). "In Canada," she writes, "power and dominance function through more liberal, inclusionary, pluralistic, multiple and fragmented formulations concerning culture and difference" (5). Her study, therefore, challenges critics of Western modernity to come to grips with the politics of liberal regimes of "democratic" social management. It issues a challenge not only in terms of thinking about the politics of inclusion and tolerance, the "institutionalisation of difference," but also in terms of the specific

history of Canada as a post-colonial settler society. Racism, Mackey insists, does not function in Canada or Australia as it does in, say, Britain. With this focus in mind, Mackey is less concerned with the cultural mosaic of Canada, than with the attitudes and anxieties of the dominant Anglophone majority, the "unmarked and yet normative categories such as 'whiteness', heterosexuality, masculinity and Western modernity" (3). Moreover, her characterization of the issue of Canadian identity, is like that of Richard J.F. Day (to be discussed shortly) that "national identity is not so much in a constant state of crisis, but that the reproduction of 'crisis' allows the nation to be a site of constantly regulated politics of identity" (13).

The House of Difference is a work of anthropology that takes a "multi-site" or "multi-locale" approach to ethnography. That approach comes out of a recognition that national identity is created in local face-to-face interactions and through the work of media and other social institutions (6). The first half of the book explores the theme of cultural diversity in official historical, artistic, touristic and government representations of national identity, while the second half, more truly ethnographic in nature, finds Mackey attending local and national festivals, celebrations, and listening to their discourses, during the Canada 125 celebrations of 1992. Chapter 2 focusses on how white Anglophone Canadians in quest of a national identity have represented and managed diverse populations from the colonial period until the second world war. Chapter 3 starts out from the postwar era and gives an account of multiculturalism as a response to Quebec separatism and increased "ethnic" militancy, while chapter 4 looks at officially sanctioned "narratives of nationhood" at play in 1992, the year in which Mackey conducted her fieldwork.

Mackey's examination of these representations of cultural diversity indicates that Canada shares the desire of other nations in having a distinct and bounded sense of identity. Historically however, the Canadian attempt, an investment of considerable energy on the part of the state since the nineteenth century, has had mixed results. Cultural diversity, whether aboriginal or immigrant, has suffered the fate of being "integrated, assimilated, appropriated, erased, tolerated and managed depending on the needs of the project" (89). She concludes that the "unmarked and dominant" culture of British Canadians casts all other cultures as "limited" and confines their inclusion to such categories as tradition, folklore, food, dancing, music and customs. "The people of other cultures," she writes, "their artifacts and customs, their *difference* from the unmarked national culture are defined always so that Canada, and the constructions of a unified Canadian identity along Western principles of progress, are *first* (89)." The book's ethnographic chapters, 5-7, confirm many of the motifs of the survey of official representations in the book's first half. The ordinary (mostly white) Canadians Mackey meets at festivals and other events are not lacking in tolerance; it's just that they insist that something called Canada and things Canadian "come first." These

encounters give us a glimpse of the limits of tolerance on the part of Canadians at a critical moment in the nation's cultural and political life. The year 1992 marked the 500th anniversary of the arrival of Columbus in the "new world," a colonialist milestone that Canadian politicians put aside in favour of a 125th birthday party for the nation. Ten years of constitutional tension had been mounting as attempts to bring Quebec symbolically into the constitutional fold fell apart. Demographic changes were further shifting the Canadian ethnic composition, and aboriginal militancy signalled yet another challenge to national unity. Yet if the moment of Mackey's fieldwork is auspicious, the narrow geographical focus imposes serious limitations on conclusiveness: the "multi-site" approach is actually limited to the narrow swath of affluence and self importance that is southern Ontario.

Multiculturalism proper is the subject of Richard J.F. Day's provocative *Multiculturalism and the History of Canadian Diversity*, a work that is content to plumb greater theoretical depths than either Grace or Mackey and remain there without coming up for air. The theoretical reference points here are mostly French: sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, philosopher Michel Foucault, and psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan. Like Mackey's ethnography, it can be argued that Day's book shows the power of the "unity in diversity myth" of Canadian society. But in true Foucaultian fashion, Day shows how social institutions, mainly governmental and academic, have defined the problem of diversity in order to fashion their power plays, one of which is keeping the whole notion of identity crisis at the fore of public concern. Day argues that "while Canadian multiculturalism presents itself as a new solution to an ancient problem of diversity, it is better seen as the most recent mode of *reproduction* and *proliferation* of that problem" (3; author's emphasis). The Canadian discourse on diversity descends in fact from an ancient European heritage, a theme he takes up in the book's third chapter focusing on Herodotus, Plato, and Aristotle. Chapters Four to Eight follow the formulations and solutions to the problem of Canadian diversity in more or less chronological order. Four takes up the problem of Canadian diversity as articulated by French and English colonizers, while Five follows the British conquest of New France and assesses the problem of managing Indian and French diversity through rational-legal control. As Day sees it, Canadian diversity is proliferating at this stage; not only are there Savages to eradicate, "useful" Indians to dominate but also civilized yet clearly different French inhabitants to manage. At the same time, the appearance of hybrid identities like Halfbreed and Metis poses the problem of what today's census takers call multiple origins, Canadians of mixed ancestry.

Chapter Six moves us into the period of Canada's own imperial gambit, namely, the exploitation of the west, the further displacement and assimilation of Native people, and the problem of settling the right kind of white European in his own little house on the prairie. The latter ushered in new problems of diversity as non-British Europeans put down roots in

prairie soil. Not only did British Canada have to manage the French-Canadian, the assimilated Indian, the Metis/Hal-breed, and the Savage; it also had to devise a "Great Chain of Race" out of Herodotus' ethnography, continental natural history, and North American social science in order to identify the new immigrant presence. Western Canada at this time itself inspired the mosaic metaphor that Canadians perennially trot out to differentiate themselves from the nasty American melting pot. While our neighbours to the south get melted down in a boiling cauldron fired by the American dream; Canadians get their patch of culture stitched into a nice cozy quilt. Ironically, it was two American women travel writers who put the metaphor into circulation. Historically and theoretically this is a key chapter, for it is with this particular proliferation of cultural diversity that arises what Day calls the "*constrained emergence theory of Canadian identity*": "*a unity of higher types will emerge through the preservation and tolerance of limited forms of difference*" (149; author's emphasis). The mosaic metaphor, the wartime management of immigrant populations (the internment of Japanese Canadians notwithstanding), and the official multiculturalism of the 1970s and onward are all based on this logic. Day's penultimate chapter looks at the changes that swept Canada in the 1960s, as a roster of rights and freedoms were extended to Canadians, bringing French Canadians, non-British immigrants, and Native peoples into the fold. Yet Day concludes that rather than making a break with old forms of violence, control and management, the new regime of rights has led "to further penetration of state forms into the daily lives of Canadians, through the progressive *officialization* of both Self and Other identities" (179; author's emphasis). The book is rounded out with a critique of the dominant spokesmen for multiculturalism as political practice, Will Kymlicka and Charles Taylor, and a call for Canadians to attend to the elements of the Canadian history "that have been most vigorously excluded and repressed" (223). Day's sees only futility and failure in store for the state's drive to create official identities, and deplores its shoring up of institutions that perpetuated colonial domination and control.

Interestingly, the call to examine repressed histories has been answered almost continuously by Canadian writers since the 1970s. The complexities of that response are the subject of Herb Wyile's thorough and thoughtful exploration of the Canadian historical imagination in the late twentieth century. *Speculative Fictions: Contemporary Canadian Novelists and the Writing of History* takes up where such influential novels as Rudy Wiebe's *The Temptations of Big Bear* (1973), Timothy Findley's *The Wars* (1977), and Joy Kogawa's *Obasan* (1981) left off in forging a modern Canadian historical consciousness. As Wyile sees it, contemporary Canadian historical fiction plays a key role in "narrating [Canada] into existence"; yet it also "inscribes a recognition of the problems with such an identity-making process and with notions of the real" (xi). The critical and artistic sensibility here is postmodern, the nod to science fiction in Wyile's title only intensifying the stance: what

we know of the past is just as uncertain as what we know of the future. We have been fooling ourselves that History records the past as it actually happened. The writers under study, published between the late 70s until today, not only broaden the range of voices from, and visions of, Canadian history but also challenge the very concepts and assumptions that underlie the writing of history. Drawing on a wide range of theorists, including Hayden White and Dominic LaCapra as well as Michel de Certeau, Linda Hutcheon, Michel Foucault, and Naomi Jacobs, Wyile assesses the work of almost a dozen English-Canadian writers. Chapter One sets out the theoretical underpinnings for the close analysis of novels that follow in subsequent chapters. Chapter Two investigates the various revisionist challenges to national history posed by writers eager to confront the legacy of colonialism or contest the narratives of nationalism or imperialism in Canadian history. Chapter Three examines the strategies by which writers effect a critique of the assumptions of historical writing in general. Chapter Four and a Postscript round out the book. Four puts a new spin on the meaning of speculate, arguing that at the same time as writers adopt the postmodern incredulity toward the master narrative of History they also invest in "history as the raw material for the production of marketable fiction" (215).

Some fourteen years after influential accounts of postmodernism in Canada, especially that of Linda Hutcheon, Wyile's survey, adds fresh insights to texts already carefully examined and assesses new interventions in the field. Interestingly, he finds today's historical writers not so experimental or transgressive as those who began publishing in the 70s and 80s. They are also, Wyile thinks, a bit too affected by or anxious about commercial culture. He notes an absence in the later fiction of self-consciousness about the task of writing history, even intimations that the lesson of one's inevitable ideological implication in storytelling is not being heeded. Taken together, Wyile's insights point up the fact that literary experimentation equals neither postmodern skepticism nor political radicalism. Another issue is complexity. Historical fiction's emergence alongside the social history and social movements of the 1960s prompted a shift from valorizing national heroes to recording the everyday lives of the neglected others. Wyile detects a tone of irreverence even hostility to official history and more traditional (especially white British Canadian) heroes that makes for simplistic portraits of colonizing bullies and their victims. It is precisely those traditional historical themes and heroes that conservative critics want us to return to as part of a recovery of Canadian tradition, and while conservative polemic frequently cites social history as the culprit for a historical consciousness too narrowly focussed on marginal groups, Wyile suggests that the emphasis on social identities in recent historical fiction reveals "a confidence in the vitality of Canadian history and commitment to appreciating that vitality not by suppressing its variety and conflict but by underscoring them" (260).

In the 21st century, Canada is changing, and so must its culture and identity. These four

books reveal a new self-consciousness and sophistication among Canadianists to the theory and practice of nation building and national identity.